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A Few Basic Facts About Laos

The accidental bombing of a friendly base in Laos last week touched off a minor explosion right here at home. Anti-war critics expressed surprise and shock to learn that the base was used for assorted undercover activities of the Central Intelligence Agency—and they went on from there to denounce the CIA's "private war" in Laos.

The CIA's activities in Laos over the past four or five years have scarcely been a secret, and with a grand total of approximately 100 agents in Laos, the CIA is hardly in a position to conduct a war.

What it has been doing is feeding, supplying and training a few thousand Meo tribesmen, under orders from the National Security Council in Washington and under the direct control of the American ambassador in Vientiane. The Meo tribesmen are poor farmers scattered over the mountains of northern Laos. They don't like the North Vietnamese or Pathet Lao Communists, and with a small amount of help and encouragement from the CIA, they have proved to be very useful and effective at harassing the enemy.

In comparison with the 70,000 North Vietnamese soldiers operating in Laos, the small CIA contingent is almost insignificant. And there would be no need for its presence if it were not for the huge invading force from Hanoi.

A little history seems in order.

Prior to the 1962 Geneva treaty guaranteeing the "neutrality" and "territorial integrity" of Laos, a contingent of U.S. Army Special Forces or "Green Berets" was stationed in that country to support the royal government. When that treaty was signed, they left. It was not until a year later—after it was obvious that the North Vietnamese had no intention of abiding by the treaty and removing their troops, and after the Laotian government asked the Americans for help once again—that the CIA sent in a small number of agents.

Incidentally, while we're on the subject of the Geneva treaty, it strikes us as rather ironic that former Ambassador Averell Harriman is denouncing South Vietnam's attempt to cut off the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Harriman will be the main speaker at one of today's "teach-ins" protesting the South Vietnamese invasion of Laos. Perhaps someone in the audience ought to remind him that the 1962 Geneva treaty, which he negotiated, and which North Vietnam signed, prohibited the use of the Ho Chi Minh Trails by foreign troops—and ask him what's wrong with South Vietnam taking it upon itself to enforce his treaty after nine years.